

Thinking through

Philosophy

An Introduction

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1 Metaphysics

The term ‘metaphysics’ was coined by students of the great Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) who were editing his writings after his death. The literal meaning of the word in its original use was ‘after the physics’, the title that Aristotle’s editors gave to the treatise they placed after the one entitled *Physics* in the master’s collected writings. But the treatise in question also went *beyond* the physics in a philosophical sense, for it dealt with questions that in some ways lie deeper than physics and most other branches of human enquiry: questions concerning the fundamental assumptions and theoretical foundations of these other enquiries. Consequently, ‘metaphysics’ came to mean the branch of philosophy that addresses basic questions about the nature of reality. For example:

- Is there a difference between the way things appear to us and the way they really are?
- Does mental or spiritual reality ultimately depend on the physical world, or is it the other way round?
- Is everything that happens predetermined? If so, does this rule out the possibility of our making genuinely free choices?
- What makes something the same thing at two different times?
- What makes a person the same person throughout the course of his or her life?

As even this small sample shows, metaphysics covers quite a range of philosophical topics. But these questions often tend to be bundled together because they all relate directly to the question at the centre of metaphysics: What is the ultimate nature of reality? Particular sciences focus on some part or some aspect of reality. The various branches of philosophy deal with certain parts or aspects of human experience: aesthetics with art, epistemology with knowledge, ethics with moral life and values. But metaphysics takes in the whole – everything that exists in whatever form – and tries to reach conclusions about its basic nature. In this short chapter we cannot hope to cover all the issues that metaphysicians discuss, but we can try to think through a few of the most interesting problems that metaphysics raises and seeks to resolve. Let us begin with the debate over whether everything that happens is predetermined.

Fatalism: whatever will be, will be

To say that everything is predetermined sounds a lot like fatalism. A fatalistic attitude may sometimes be useful – when dealing with misfortune, for example – but is there any reason to suppose that there is a force, ‘Fate’, that dictates the course of events in the world?

We need to distinguish between fatalism and determinism. Fatalism, understood as a doctrine rather than just an attitude, can take more than one form. The idea that there is some sort of metaphysical force controlling our destinies is perhaps the most familiar to us because it is central to many Greek legends. As the Greeks saw it, fate decreed that Patroclus would be killed by Hector, who would be killed by Achilles, who would in turn be killed by Paris, and not even the gods could alter this sequence of events. This doctrine expresses a feeling of helplessness in the face of natural and supernatural forces over which people feel they have little control. It has less currency nowadays, presumably because we feel less helpless.

Fatalism has also been put forward as a doctrine about the timelessness of truth. Take the statement 'On 24 March 1603, Queen Elizabeth I of England died.' This was true on that very day. It has remained true ever since and will continue to be true for ever. By the same token, the statement was true at any time prior to Elizabeth's death. So millions of years before she lived, it was still true that she would die on that particular day. For that matter, it was true on the day Elizabeth died that you would read this sentence at precisely this moment in time. What, if anything, are we to conclude from this? Certainly, we can say that this kind of timelessness seems to be a feature of our concept of truth. But it is hard to see how this entails the dramatic conclusion that our lives are somehow predestined and that nothing we do can alter what has been preordained for us.

Fatalism can also be understood in a very general way as the view that the course of future events cannot be altered from what it is going to be. Our hopes, desires, intentions and actions are powerless to make any difference because they themselves are part of the inevitable sequence. This differs from the first form of fatalism mentioned above in that it does not posit fate as a supernatural force directing natural events. Indeed, it does not posit any explanation at all as to why the future is unalterable. It is thus compatible with, yet different from, determinism, which specifies why the future must be the way it will be.

Determinism: one thing leads to another

According to **determinism**, everything that happens is determined by prior causes. The word 'determined' here denotes a relation between two events or states of affairs. To say that A determines B is to say both that A *causes* B and that A *necessitates* B (that is, given A, B *must* follow). Determinism thus holds that every event is the necessary result of the chain of causes leading up to it, a chain that runs back indefinitely into the past. Put more globally, the state of the universe at any particular moment could not be otherwise, given the state the universe was in at the immediately preceding moment. One implication of this view is that from a given state of the universe there can only be one possible future. Another implication is that all future states of the universe are – in principle at least – completely predictable.

The idea that everything has a cause seems reasonable. But the idea that the entire history of the universe follows a necessary, predetermined path does not obviously follow from this principle and is not obviously true. So why should we believe it?

The principle that every event is caused is known as the **causal principle**. It is presupposed in science (except in some parts of quantum mechanics) and also in everyday life. If you start to feel a pain in your neck you assume that something is causing the pain. If your doctor tried to tell you that the pain was one of those rare occurrences, an event without a cause, you would immediately conclude that you need to change your doctor. It is possible to be a good doctor and not know what is causing a patient's pain; it is not possible to be a good doctor and believe that some pains are uncaused. Such a belief would immediately undermine one's credibility both as a scientist and as a person of common sense.

It is perfectly true that the causal principle by itself does not logically entail determinism. But the route from one to the other is fairly direct. An old version of the causal principle, first proposed by the Greeks, says that 'nothing can come from nothing'. This obviously excludes the possibility of objects suddenly popping into existence from nowhere and for no reason. But it also rules out the possibility that an effect could somehow contain more than was 'in' its cause or causes. For instance, a car cannot weigh more than the sum of its parts; water in a pan cannot get hotter than the burner that is heating it. These considerations lead to what is known as the **principle of sufficient reason** which, in its simplest version, states that everything has a complete explanation. This principle is intended to apply equally to events, things, and states of affairs. If, for simplicity's sake, we just speak of states of affairs (which we will allow to include laws of nature), the principle asserts that for any state of affairs (S), there is some other state or combination of states (C) which is *sufficient* to produce S. Saying that C is 'sufficient' to produce S means that given C, S will necessarily follow. The complete explanation of S is thus an accurate description of C.

Let us illustrate what we have just said with an example. Suppose S to be the sinking of the *Titanic*; C will be all the relevant factors that helped bring this about: the course and speed of the ship; the course and position of the iceberg it hit; the size of the iceberg; the thickness of the ship's hull; the physical structure of the ice and the steel that collided; the laws of physics that account for the fact that the ice broke through the steel rather than bouncing off it or crumbling before it; and so on. It is easy to see that this list could be extended infinitely; there is no limit to the number of things that could be included in the complete explanation. For instance, in a complete explanation we would have to mention the fact that the ship left port exactly when it did, the fact that there is ice at the earth's poles, and the fact that radar had not yet been invented.

Suppose, though, that S is the state of the whole universe at the present moment. According to the principle of sufficient reason, this too has a complete explanation. The explanation will be a description of the way the universe was at all previous

times together with the laws of nature that govern the way the universe changes over time. But if this really is a complete explanation, then the way the universe is right now was *necessitated* by its previous states together with the laws of nature. It could not have been otherwise. To say it could have been otherwise would be to say that some features of the universe in its present state cannot be explained; they just happen to be that way for no particular reason. This possibility is precisely what the principle of sufficient reason rules out.

Determinism thus seems to be implied by the principle of sufficient reason, which makes it theoretically very plausible. Its credibility is also bolstered by the fact that it has long been a basic presupposition of modern science. Most of the astounding progress that science has made over the past four centuries has been made on the basis of a mechanistic and deterministic view of the world, a view that treats the universe as a system of objects moving and interacting according to fixed laws, rather like balls on a pool table. This analogy is actually quite helpful, and brings out further implications of what we have said above.

Imagine a pool table without pockets. If I set a ball in motion on this table, it is possible to predict more or less where it will be in ten seconds' time. A well programmed computer, provided with accurate data about the dimensions of the table, the initial position, speed and direction of the ball, the level of friction between it and the table surface, the elasticity of the edge cushion, the presence and type of spin imparted to the ball, etc., could predict the position of the ball at any future time with great accuracy. Should another ball be introduced, also moving around the table, the computer would be able to take account of this added complexity and predict whether the balls would ever collide, and if so, where, when and with what result. In principle, no matter how large the table, and no matter how many balls are set in motion on it, a sufficiently powerful computer provided with accurate enough information should be able to predict where each ball will be and what it will be doing at any given future moment.

The scientific point of view, which has been so spectacularly successful over the last few centuries, sees the difference between the pool table and the actual universe we live in as quantitative not qualitative. The universe may contain many more objects; these objects may be less uniform and their interactions incredibly complex. But for all that, their behaviour is governed by a small number of basic, universal laws. A powerful enough computer, properly programmed and provided with enough information should, in principle, be able to predict with complete accuracy the state of the universe at any future moment.

Is this really still the way scientists view the world? What about such discoveries as the indeterminacy principle, or the more recent advent of chaos theory? Haven't they knocked determinism on the head?

To some extent, quantum mechanics has indeed dented determinism's prestige. According to the indeterminacy principle there are some events – the behaviour of individual electrons in certain circumstances – that are not causally determined

and therefore impossible to predict. We can predict that, say, seven out of ten electrons in a given situation will behave in a certain way; but we cannot be sure how any particular electron will behave. The natural response to this is to assume that our inability to predict what the electron will do is due to our ignorance of the causal factors that determine its behaviour. But most quantum physicists explicitly reject this idea. The indeterminacy, they say, is not simply a matter of our own uncertainty; it inheres in nature.

Two points about this claim are worth noting. First, there have always been some physicists who are suspicious of it, most famously Albert Einstein who objected that ‘God does not play dice’ (to which his fellow physicist Niels Bohr replied, ‘Albert, stop telling God what to do!’). Just possibly, we will one day arrive at a different theoretical model that will provide an explanation for events which on our present model appear undetermined and hence inexplicable. Second, the indeterminacy in question only concerns subatomic particles; the behaviour of larger objects, which range in size from the microscopically small to the astronomically huge, is still thought to be thoroughly predictable – at least in principle.

Chaos theory is somewhat different, since it is not incompatible with determinism. It says only that there are some systems and subsystems that are so complex, and in which small variations in the initial conditions can lead to such massively different outcomes, that accurate predictions are impossible. Long-term weather patterns or trends in the global economy offer familiar examples of this kind of unpredictability. But complexity, no matter how great, is not the same as indeterminacy. Die-hard determinists can accept chaos theory because the limits it places on predictability arise from the limitations of our knowledge and reasoning abilities, not from the intrinsic nature of things themselves.

Freedom versus determinism

If we grant that outside the realm of subatomic physics determinism seems to be supported by the success of the sciences that presuppose it, doesn't this imply that human actions are just as predetermined and therefore as predictable as all other events? If so, isn't determinism obviously false, given the fact that we have free will?

Here we arrive at one of the great metaphysical disputes in the history of philosophy: the conflict between determinism and the belief in what is usually called free will. This controversy is actually one of several that arise when the scientific picture of the world conflicts with so-called common sense. As we have seen, the success of the sciences seems to provide a good reason for accepting determinism. But if determinism is true, then human decisions and action must, like all other events, be the necessary effects of prior causes. Yet most of us believe that at least some of the time we are responsible for our actions; we praise and blame ourselves according to what we do, just as we praise and blame others. In holding ourselves responsible, we

imply that we are in control of our actions, that we might act otherwise, and that in adopting one course of action over another we make a free choice. But determinism would seem to rule out the very possibility of this sort of freedom.

It is very important to be clear about the kind of freedom that determinism threatens. Let us make a distinction between ‘metaphysical freedom’ and ‘practical freedom’. **Practical freedom** is the freedom to do what one wishes, to realize one’s desires. This is the kind of freedom that people can have in differing degrees. Someone in prison has less of it than someone at liberty. Winning the lottery would increase my practical freedom: it would enable me to travel more extensively, attend more concerts and eat at more expensive restaurants. Losing both arms would reduce my practical freedom: it would prevent me from practising the violin, decorating my bedroom or playing tennis.

This kind of practical freedom is quite distinct from **metaphysical freedom**, often referred to as **freedom of the will**. To exercise this kind of freedom means being ultimately responsible for one’s choices. I may be tied up in a prison cell, my practical freedom severely limited; but it is still up to me whether I fight against my situation or resign myself to it, whether I fraternize with my jailers or go on hunger strike, whether I spend my time daydreaming or humming my favourite songs or practising mental arithmetic or composing limericks. Although we might allow that young children and mentally impaired people do not have this kind of freedom to the same extent as normal adults, we generally think of it as something that, if we have it at all, we all have to more or less the same degree. However, free will is not usually ascribed to other animals. Compared to practical freedom, it is thus viewed as something that one either has or does not have, depending on one’s basic mental capacities. It should be clear that it is this metaphysical notion of freedom – freedom of the will – that is threatened by determinism.

Given that we are committed to making our beliefs consistent with each other, there seem to be three obvious ways in which we can respond to this conflict:

Option 1: Accept determinism and reject the belief in free will.

Option 2: Show how determinism and the idea of free will are compatible.

Option 3: Endorse the idea that we have free will and reject determinism (at least as far as human actions are concerned).

Let us consider these options in turn.

Option 1: Determinism is true, freedom is an illusion

This view is often called **hard determinism**. Its proponents see themselves as taking a hard-headed attitude towards our precious but (as they see it) mistaken belief in freedom and responsibility. We have already seen that determinism is a plausible doctrine, supported by the success of science. An obvious question, then, is whether anything can be said against it by defenders of free will.

One reason for holding that freedom is real and not illusory is simply that this is how it feels. Samuel Johnson articulated this argument when he pronounced, in typically dogmatic fashion, ‘Sir, we *know* the will is free, and there’s an end of it.’ When I make certain choices, whether they be trivial or momentous, it usually seems to me that I could have chosen otherwise and am thus responsible for my decision. When I order a drink I have it in my power to order either tea or coffee. If I give evidence at a trial I can choose to tell the truth or to lie.

This argument is essentially an appeal to intuition. It has the merit of being supremely simple and, for many people, extremely persuasive. But to those who are sceptical about free will it is too simple – even simplistic. What kind of argument consists of nothing more than an appeal to the way things *seem*? The sun *seems* to move across the sky, and for thousands of years the belief that the sun moved while the earth was at rest was common sense; but appearances were deceptive, and common sense was wrong. Feelings, too, can easily be misleading. Millions of people feel that they are being watched over by a divine power, but this hardly constitutes an argument for the existence of God. Hard determinists are thus unlikely to be moved by an appeal to unexamined feelings.

A second reason for upholding the idea that we have free will is that all our moral principles and institutions rest on the assumption that we are free. We routinely praise and blame ourselves and others for what we do. We think that at least some of the people who break the law are justly punished. And we believe that people who are acclaimed and rewarded for significant achievements deserve their laurels. But if determinism is true, the whole idea that anyone *deserves* anything is nonsense, since no one is truly responsible for any of their actions.

How strong is this argument? It certainly shows that determinism conflicts with some of our most deeply entrenched beliefs and practices. But it hardly proves that determinism is false. A determinist can reply: ‘So much the worse for those beliefs and practices. It might be nicer if they were well founded; but they are not. The truth is sometimes other than what we would wish.’ Moreover, so far as rewards and punishments are concerned, these can perhaps be justified from a deterministic point of view, since they help to determine actions in a beneficial way. Rewards promote good behaviour, punishments discourage bad behaviour. Indeed, the reason we all believe this is precisely because human behaviour is fairly predictable. Determinists could even argue that the sooner we accept the full implications of this idea the better, since we will then be encouraged to set about fine tuning the mechanisms we already use to condition and control people’s propensity to act in certain ways. Of course, there may be some social benefits to keeping alive the whole mythology of desert; that is something else the social scientists will have to investigate. But this does not constitute an argument for the truth of the mythology.

These two arguments – from the way things feel and from morality – may help to explain why so many people believe in the reality of free will. But the arguments do little or nothing to *demonstrate* that we are free, and are thus unlikely to impress

serious determinists. But determinism may be vulnerable to a different, rather subtle kind of criticism, one that questions determinism's own internal coherence.

If someone espouses a philosophical doctrine we are always entitled to ask why we should believe it. Usually, we are then given reasons for believing this doctrine rather than some alternative theory. The reasons typically consist of empirical evidence, logical arguments, demonstrations that the doctrine in question follows from other beliefs we hold, refutations of rival positions, etc. The discourse in which these reasons are presented – whether it is spoken or written – implicitly presupposes that both the speaker and the audience should be swayed only by rational considerations of this sort (see the 'Reasons and causes' box).

How does all this relate to the debate about determinism? Well, according to the determinist, everything we do is causally determined. But if this really is a universal truth it must cover our acceptance of certain beliefs and our rejection of others. From the determinist perspective, it should be just as possible to predict which philosophical positions a person will embrace as it is to predict what kind of foods they will prefer or what kind of partner they will select. Determinists must

think
critically!

Reasons and causes

Always distinguish between reasons and causes when analysing an argument. This is a very important distinction. Suppose I ask someone why they believe abortion to be morally wrong. Here are two possible responses they might give:

- 1 I believe abortion is wrong because I was brought up as a Catholic.
- 2 I believe abortion is wrong because I think the foetus has the status of a person, and it is wrong to kill an innocent person.

In a sense, response (1) offers a reason for their belief; but it is not the kind of reason that has any persuasive power. With (1) they have, in fact, cited a *cause* of their belief as opposed to providing a rational justification for it. I can accept that what they say is true – their being raised as a Catholic did lead them to condemn abortion – while still rejecting the belief in question. If, on the other hand, they respond to my question with (2), then they have given a genuine reason for their belief in the sense of providing it with a *rational justification*. In this case, I cannot consistently accept what they say while still disagreeing with their conclusion.

This distinction between reasons and causes correlates to a distinction between justification and explanation. Our actions and beliefs can perhaps be *explained* by identifying their causes; but they cannot be *justified* in this way. Only reasons can justify. And only reasons are to be respected as having legitimate persuasive force.

therefore concede that although they play the game of supporting their deterministic philosophy with rational arguments, these arguments are not necessarily what led them to embrace determinism; their opinions, like all their other preferences, are merely the effects of causes over which they have no control. Moreover, similar considerations apply to their attempts to persuade other people to adopt their point of view. Whether or not their arguments are persuasive may have nothing to do with their intrinsic soundness. It is not even clear why determinists should care about whether their arguments are sound. Offering sound arguments is one method of persuasion; producing effective rhetoric is another. Does a determinist have any reason to prefer the former to the latter?

Determinists may try to wriggle out of this difficulty by claiming that rational justifications are still important in their eyes because good evidence and sound arguments have greater causal efficacy than weak evidence or invalid reasoning; our brains are so wired as to be more readily affected by rational considerations. But this response is weak in two ways. First, it just is not true that the stronger argument always – or even usually – defeats the weaker. Distressingly, good evidence and sound reasoning can easily be overwhelmed by effective rhetoric. Secondly, and more importantly, the response fails to recognize the depth of the problem. Causal influence and rational persuasion are two entirely different kinds of operation; the corresponding concepts belong to different spheres of discourse. The critical question that determinists must answer is: Why should we respect anyone's belief in determinism if their holding this belief is, ultimately, only the predetermined outcome of a long causal chain? Why should we take their arguments seriously if they themselves conceive of rational persuasion as just a form of causation?

Determinism thus seems to undermine a basic presupposition of rational discussion: ideally, at least, we ought to arrive at our theoretical beliefs solely on the basis of evidence and argumentation.

Option 2: Freedom and determinism are compatible

Why must determinism and the idea that we are free be viewed as incompatible? Doesn't the whole debate over freedom and determinism arise because freedom is being thought of as something mysterious, some weird breach in the natural order? But to be free simply means being able to do what one wants. And if we stick with this common sense notion of freedom there need be no problem, since it is perfectly compatible with determinism.

This attempt to reconcile the two positions is commonly called **soft determinism**. It has attracted many adherents, among them Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and David Hume. Soft determinism is, as its name indicates, a form of determinism; it does not allow for uncaused events. But it sees no need to, since it holds that even if all events are causally determined there is still a clear difference between free and unfree actions. I am free at this moment to leave my desk and go for a walk, but I

am not free to fly like a bird. I am free to go down to the basement, but if armed robbers burst into my room and forced me into the basement at gunpoint I would not be acting freely. According to the soft determinist, then, I am free to perform an action as long as I am not forced to do it or prevented from doing it. If, however, I am constrained or coerced, then I am not free.

Soft determinism certainly has a superficial plausibility. But for many philosophers its claim to dissolve the conflict between free will and determinism turns out to be a conjuring trick, a piece of metaphysical sleight of hand. Recall the distinction we made earlier between practical freedom (the freedom to do what one wishes) and metaphysical freedom (being ultimately responsible for one's choices). The problem we are discussing is how to reconcile determinism and the idea of metaphysical freedom (also known as free will). Soft determinism claims to be able to do this, but it only does it by switching the concept of freedom that is at issue.

To see this, consider the following scenario. Suppose you hypnotized twenty people, and while they were under hypnosis you told them that when next offered a choice between vanilla ice cream and strawberry ice cream they are to choose vanilla. A little while after being woken they are given this choice and, predictably, they all choose vanilla. Now let us ask this question: When they choose vanilla, is their choice free? Well, there are no external constraints: both kinds of ice cream are available, both are affordable, and no risk accompanies either choice. Nor is there any external coercion. No one is putting a gun to anyone's head and forcing them to choose vanilla. Moreover, if you asked them why they chose vanilla they would probably simply say that they preferred this kind of ice cream on this particular occasion. In other words, they were just doing what they wanted to do, fulfilling their desires. Since this is precisely how we defined *practical* freedom, we must conclude that, at least in this sense, they are acting freely.

Yet there is something odd about describing this sort of choice as free. In every case the choice followed from a particular desire; but the desire was not something for which the person was responsible, nor something over which she had any control. There may have been no external coercion, but there was a kind of internal coercion. Through your suggestions you, the hypnotist, determined each person's choice. Their choices were thus perfectly predictable; and while they may have been free in one sense of the term, they were not free in the metaphysical sense. In short, at the moment of choice they were not exercising free will.

Soft determinism may well show that the concept of *practical freedom* is compatible with determinism. But no one ever really doubted this. The problem had to do with the metaphysical notion of freedom, and soft determinism does nothing to show that *this* concept of freedom can be reconciled with determinism. By identifying freedom with practical freedom, soft determinism effectively collapses into hard determinism. Confronted with the question of whether we are ultimately responsible for any of our choices, soft determinists must say no. Like hard determinists, they are completely sceptical about the possibility that human beings can influence the course of events by exercising something called free will.

This failure of soft determinism to advance beyond hard determinism comes out most clearly when we consider actions and choices that are morally significant. Suppose I decide to drive my car even though I have been drinking. If I cause an accident, should I be penalized? Common sense says yes, and the reason is simple: I ought not to have driven while intoxicated. But according to a well known formula first stated by Immanuel Kant, 'ought implies can'. That is, it only makes sense to say that I *ought* to do something if it is *possible* for me to do it. Conversely, if an action lies beyond my powers I cannot be under any obligation to perform it. This is why it makes no sense for me to tell you that you ought to cure cancer, but it is reasonable of me to tell you that you should keep your promises.

Whether I should be penalized for driving while intoxicated thus hinges on whether I could have chosen not to drive. According to the defenders of free will I could have made this choice. According to hard determinists my choice was inevitable, given all the antecedent circumstances. And according to the soft determinists? Soft determinists will perhaps say that I could have not driven if I had made a different choice; and I could have made a different choice if certain other things had been different: for instance, the configuration of my brain at the moment of choice, my genetic inheritance, my upbringing, or particular moments in my life history. But answering the question in this way is surely a cop out. The issue is not whether I could have chosen otherwise *under different circumstances*, but whether I could have made a different choice in that particular situation. And the soft determinists, when it comes right down to it, have to say that I could not.

Option 3: Freedom is real; determinism is false

It is one thing to identify problems in hard and soft determinism; it is another thing entirely to provide positive grounds for believing that human beings really do have the remarkable capacity known as freedom of the will: the capacity to make choices that are not predetermined and that somehow initiate new causal chains. Determinism may have its difficulties; but the idea that each of us is the site of a strange kind of fault in the natural order of things – a place where the sequence of causes and effects can be halted, broken and then given a new beginning – is undeniably problematic. The central problem facing all those who defend free will even though they see it as incompatible with determinism can be stated simply: How is free will possible?

One way of answering this question is just to identify freedom with the absence of causal determination, a view sometimes referred to as **indeterminism**. On this view, an act of will (what philosophers call a 'volition') is free simply in virtue of being uncaused. The model of free action to which this gives rise is something like this. I am continually subject to all sorts of causal influences, both physical and psychological. These determine many of my characteristics, preferences, desires and actions. But at least some of the time I can summon up a volition that is not an effect of anything; it just occurs. However, although it is not caused, the volition itself can be a cause; it causes me to act in a certain way. For example, when faced

with a choice between tea or coffee, the volition is the mental act through which I choose one or the other. I then act accordingly, and since my action flows from an undetermined volition we describe it as free.

There is an obvious problem with this sort of indeterminism. If the volition is something I ‘summon up’, then it does not just occur: it is the effect of my act of summoning. If, on the other hand, it really does just occur in an uncaused way, then it is something that just happens to me. But in that case it seems to be more like a spasmodic twitch than a deliberate action, so it can hardly be the basis for what we think of as a free, responsible choice. Nor does it help to relocate the undetermined event by supposing that while the volition is caused by my act of summoning it up, this latter act is undetermined. This simply pushes the difficulty back one step. Exactly the same objection can now be raised against the undetermined act of summoning or producing a volition. If it is uncaused, then it is something that happens to me, not something I choose or make happen; it is not, therefore, something for which I can be held responsible.

The roots of responsibility: an indeterminist view

Clearly, simple indeterminism will not do. Yet many philosophers who wish to defend the idea of free will believe that indeterminacy of some kind must play a role in any positive account of how this kind of freedom is possible. After all, if it does not, then we seem to be left only with sequences of fully determined events, and it is hard to see how any of these could be called free acts. In recent times, philosophers have therefore offered more sophisticated attempts to view some of the anti-deterministic developments in science mentioned above – notably quantum mechanics and chaos theory – as providing us, as agents, with the opportunity to make occasional creative interventions in the causal sequences that influence our lives. Let us consider an account of this sort. (The account that follows is loosely based on the defence of free will put forward by the American philosopher Robert Kane.)

The key idea to be defended is that we are, in some way and to some extent, responsible for our actions. For this to be so it is not necessary that every act we perform be perfectly free. It might be enough for us to be responsible for a relatively small number of choices we make – those choices that are especially significant in establishing patterns of behaviour, moral character, and the trajectory of our lives. For example, if I am a smoker I may not be free simply to give up smoking at any time. I may resolve this morning to go through the day without a cigarette, but the physical and psychological dependencies may prove too great, amounting to an irresistibly strong causal determination of my actions. But there will have been times in the past, before I was hopelessly addicted, when I was better able to avoid lighting up and chose not to.

Having free will, on this view, is a matter of being responsible for at least some key life-shaping and character-shaping decisions. For this to be possible it seems I

must be able, by means of a mental act (a volition), to affect the physical sequences of events that take place in my brain. Exactly how I do this is not clear; perhaps I determine by my decision what would otherwise be an undetermined event at the subatomic level. And this influence which my volition brings to bear on subatomic events in my brain – taking advantage, as it were, of the chink in determinism offered by subatomic indeterminacy – can ultimately be quite profound; for chaos theory tells us that in enormously complex systems (and the brain is certainly such a system), minute variations at one point in a sequence can result in massive differences later on.

This account of how freedom is possible contains at least two important ideas. First, the fact that the contemporary scientific picture of the world is not perfectly deterministic does weaken the case against free will; something like the principle of indeterminacy may indeed provide one of freedom's necessary conditions. Second, I can be ultimately responsible for my behaviour even though many, perhaps the great majority, of my individual actions are fully determined by past events. But it also runs up against two serious objections. One of these has to do with the moment of volitional influence. The brain is a physical system and, like other physical systems, operates according to laws of cause and effect. These laws govern the way *physical* things interact. Whether we are talking about planetary motions, chemical reactions, photosynthesis, cell reproduction, electromagnetism or quantum mechanics, we are always talking about physical things and forces. The principle of indeterminacy is similarly a theory about physical entities, forces and processes. But according to the above account of freedom, a decision or volition by me, an event we commonly understand as a *mental* event, somehow affects *physical* processes in my brain; electrons that might have done one thing do something else as a result of my decision.

How this is possible, though, remains a mystery. If the volition or decision for which I am responsible is itself simply a physical event in my brain, then it is presumably determined by causal laws like almost all other physical events, in which case it cannot be free. If, on the other hand, it is not a physical event, how can it exercise an influence on physical events? The fact that the purported effect of this influence may be tiny, nothing more than a minute alteration in the behaviour of an electron, does not lessen the mystery one jot. To be fair, this problem – how any kind of mental causation is possible – has troubled philosophers for centuries and is one of the central controversies in the philosophy of mind. Nevertheless, it is a problem that any attempt to link free will to physical indeterminacy has to confront.

There is a second objection to the indeterministic account of free will we have been discussing. We saw how, according to this theory, I can be held responsible for my actions even though most of them are causally determined and therefore, considered in themselves, not free. All that responsibility requires is that my actions flow from behaviour patterns or aspects of my character for which I am ultimately responsible. In this way, the theory avoids supposing that the kind of indeterminacy that free will requires is continually present and that we continually

take advantage of it, somehow influencing the otherwise undetermined behaviour of electrons in our brain every time we make any kind of decision. But here the theory loses touch with some of the common sense intuitions that prompt us to believe we have free will in the first place. What common sense tells us is not that we exercise free will *occasionally*, at the crucial crossroads of our lives, but that we do in fact exercise it all the time. I am now sitting down. If I wished to, I could now stand up. Indeed, at each and every moment during the time that it takes me to write this sentence I could, if I chose, stop writing and stand up. *That* is what having free will feels like. An adequate account of free will needs to accommodate and, if possible, explain this basic intuition. But it is not clear how an indeterministic theory like the one discussed can do this.

The feeling of freedom

Why keep worrying about how to reconcile the idea of freedom with determinism? Isn't this basic sense we all have – that we are free – at least as important and as credible as any philosophical theory?

Boldly asserting the reality of freedom is one way of cutting the Gordian knot in the tangled controversy over free will and determinism. This is, in effect, the step taken by one of the twentieth century's best-known champions of metaphysical freedom, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (see the box). According to Sartre, the fact that we are free is a, or rather *the*, fundamental truth about the kind of beings we are. It is a truth we are continually aware of, even if only dimly at times. Sartre does not try to show how freedom is possible in a deterministic world. Rather, he takes the experience of what it is like to be a human being – which involves, at its centre, the experience of freedom – as unshakeable evidence that determinism does not hold sway here.

However, Sartre does try to explain how freedom is possible in another sense. In his view, our freedom arises out of the peculiar nature of consciousness. When I attend to something, as when I listen to a piece of music, my consciousness is filled, so to speak, by what it is attending to. Similarly, when I fully engage in an activity – say, dancing – I 'give myself over' almost entirely to that activity. But however immersed or engaged I am, however much I lose myself in the subject or activity, I never lose myself entirely. There is always a residual kind of self-consciousness present, a background awareness that whatever is happening is happening to me. Because of this, I can at any moment become fully self-conscious about my situation and what I am doing. The residual self-consciousness serves as a kind of pilot light, always there to fire up a more fully fledged self-consciousness under certain circumstances. And with full self-consciousness comes the possibility of withdrawal, of disengagement from what occupies me now and a turning to some alternative object or activity.

This ability to disengage from one activity and engage instead in something else is precisely what we mean by freedom, though I express my freedom just as much



Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)

Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris and lived most of his life there. A prolific writer, he gained renown as a philosopher, novelist, playwright, literary critic and journalist. He was also a well-known political activist, though he was never affiliated to any political party. His best known works include the novel *Nausea*, the plays *No Exit* and *The Flies*, and two huge philosophical treatises, *Being and Nothingness* and *Critique of*

Dialectical Reason. Sartre's earlier writings are representative of the philosophical movement known as **existentialism**, which emphasizes the importance of lived experience (rather than abstract theoretical principles) as the starting point and proper subject matter for philosophical reflection.

Like other thinkers whose names are often linked to existentialism (such as Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Kafka and Camus), Sartre focuses on the situation of the individual who feels essentially alone in a world which is, at best, indifferent to his or her wishes. What is most striking about Sartre's account of this situation is his emphasis on and conception of human freedom. Sartre rejects most traditional accounts of human nature, arguing that in the case of human beings 'existence precedes essence'. What this means is that we have no fixed nature that determines what we will do, the way a rock, a tree or a dog has; nor were we designed with a definite purpose which it is our job to fulfil, as is the case with any human artefact. Instead, we have to choose for ourselves what actions to perform, what values to embrace, what lifestyle to adopt, what goals to pursue. And in the contemporary world we make our choices without the guidance, comfort or security of the metaphysical and religious doctrines that people leaned on in an earlier time. I may try to follow the Ten Commandments; but it is still my decision to view them as objective moral or religious truths. I may join a political movement and fight for social justice; but I can offer no absolute proof that my ideals are better than any others, or that the cause I adopt will necessarily triumph in the long run. Thus, while Sartre holds that we are radically free – free at every moment to break with what we have been in the past and with what is expected of us – he also sees this freedom as a burden. We are, in his words, 'condemned to be free', and we make our choices 'in anguish, abandonment, and despair'.

when I continue doing what I am doing as when I switch activities. Both courses of action are equally the result of a choice I make. The choices may be trivial or life altering; the freedom they express is essentially the same. While teaching a class, I may be thoroughly immersed in the issues being discussed and in my role as teacher. But if I notice through the window the warm air, the green grass, the smell of lilac and other signs of spring, I have the option of instantaneously ending the class, discarding my professorial persona, and heading off for the great outdoors. By the same token, I am free not to show up for class tomorrow, or ever again for that matter, abandoning my job in order to pursue some other goal or experiment with a different lifestyle. Of course, most of us do not do this kind of thing; our behaviour, on the whole, is actually rather predictable. And some choices are certainly much easier than others: for example, it is easier to choose to have another cigarette if one is addicted to nicotine than it is to give up smoking on the spot. But this does not alter the fact that, if Sartre is right, throughout our lives as conscious adults every moment is a moment of choice.

What conclusions can we draw from our discussion of the problem of freedom and determinism? We have shown that the middle way offered by soft determinism does not resolve the dilemma. We are thus left with the original sharp opposition between two apparently irreconcilable views. Determinism has behind it the weight and authority of traditional science; but it is unclear how determinists can defend the rationality of their own position if they agree that their acceptance of it is causally determined. Moreover, the indeterminism that has appeared in certain branches of contemporary physics perhaps offers a loophole for defenders of free will, and both common sense and our moral interests encourage us to try to climb through it. Unfortunately, we are not sure how to do this. One reason is that science, in addition to being largely deterministic, is also materialistic: it takes reality to be entirely physical. If this is true, then every so-called mental event, whether it be a sense-perception, an idea or a volition, must manifest itself in physical terms. Every thought, every wish, every choice must not just have a physical correlate in the brain but must somehow be identical to some event in the brain. Whether or not this is the case is a question much discussed in the philosophy of mind. What concerns us here, though, is the fact that once again we find the scientific account of the world apparently shutting out the possibility of free will. For free will to be exercised it seems that it must be possible for a mental event to determine a physical process: for instance, my *thought* that drunken driving is wrong and my decision to act on this conviction must cause me to hand over my car keys to a friend. Exactly how this is possible if reality is essentially and entirely physical remains a mystery.

Materialism

As so often happens in philosophy, one problem leads to another. The question of whether we have free will turns out to be linked to the question of how

mind and body are related. And this central issue in the philosophy of mind relates to still broader metaphysical questions: Is the universe a purely physical entity? Or do we have good reason for supposing that there is more to reality than that?

Why assume that the universe is ultimately material, or, for that matter, ultimately any one type of thing? We witness tremendous variety in the world around us – compare a pebble, a glass of water, a snake, the human brain and the sun – and this all occurs only in the tiny nook of the universe that we happen to inhabit.

Given the variety of phenomena we encounter, it is rather remarkable how readily philosophers have asserted that all reality belongs, ultimately, to a single category. This view is called **monism**, and the most popular form of monism in the history of Western philosophy has been **materialism**. The philosophical doctrine of materialism should not be confused with the kind of materialism that involves placing great value on the acquisition and possession of wealth and consumer goods. Materialism in metaphysics is simply the view that reality is essentially material.

Materialism is certainly a venerable doctrine. Some of the earliest Greek philosophers were materialists, most notably the atomists who held that reality is made up of indivisible material particles (atoms) which move around in a void and combine together to form all the different kinds of things to be found in the world. In this bold speculation the atomists were following in the footsteps of earlier thinkers who had posited the key idea that underlying the apparent diversity of the world we inhabit there is a fundamental unity. Thales of Miletus, for instance, who is generally credited with being the first philosopher in the Western tradition, believed that this unity consisted in the fact that everything came from or was in some sense made from water. Although this idea is likely to strike us as bizarre at first, a little reflection may lessen our incredulity. What probably struck Thales about water, apart from it being necessary for all life, is that it can take the form of a liquid, a solid or a gas depending on its temperature. Underlying these variations there is just one substance that is able to appear in different forms. Admittedly, it is still a bit of a leap to conclude that water is the basic component of everything in the world. But Thales' speculation is noteworthy for being one of the earliest versions of the general principle that reality is, at bottom, one. This means that when we observe change we are not observing the disappearance of one thing and the creation of another but, rather, the transformation of a single thing from one of its forms to another. It also means that all the marvellous variety we encounter in the world is, from a metaphysical point of view, superficial; the deeper reality that gives rise to it has a single, uniform nature. On this view, the deepest understanding of phenomena involves gaining insight into the unity that underlies difference and change.

The Presocratic Philosophers

Western philosophy usually traces its origins back to a group of remarkable men who lived roughly between 600 and 400 BCE, mainly in the eastern part of the Greek world. They are often referred to as the Presocratics because they preceded Socrates (469–399 BCE), the Athenian thinker who decisively influenced the direction of Western philosophy through his brilliant student Plato. Only fragments of their writings have survived, but we have enough to reconstruct at least some of their thinking (though some of their pronouncements remain enigmatic). Working before there had been any serious attempt to demarcate the different areas of human enquiry, the Presocratics combined scientific investigations and metaphysical speculations, often expressing their ideas in poetic or figurative language.

Thales of Miletus was one of the first of these thinkers. He achieved renown in his day for, among other things, successfully predicting a solar eclipse. But his contribution to philosophy lies in his hypothesis that a uniform reality underlies the many ways things appear to us. Thales identifies this reality with water, which was understood to be one of the four primary elements (the other three being earth, air and fire).

Anaximander of Miletus moved away from thinking of ultimate reality as essentially like some particular substance that we encounter in experience. He conceived of it more abstractly – a crucial step in the development of science – as what he called the 'boundless', something without spatial or temporal limits. Out of this source come opposites like hot and cold, wet and dry, which interact to produce the phenomena with which we are familiar. The 'boundless' also serves to maintain an overall balance between the opposites, ensuring that no one element becomes predominant.

Parmenides of Elea also avoided identifying ultimate reality with any particular substance. But he does argue that the only way to comprehend its true nature is through reflection rather than through sense perception. And such reflection, he claims, reveals that reality must be essentially one, unmoving, indivisible, unchanging and perfect. This position was ingeniously supported by his follower Zeno, who constructed a number of paradoxes aimed at showing that such things as change, motion and divisibility, which common sense believes in, cannot be real.

Heraclitus of Ephesus shares with Parmenides a somewhat enigmatic style. Indeed, his obscure utterances may have been responsible for his alleged sobriquet 'the Dark One'. But unlike Parmenides he is not inclined to view diversity and change as illusory. On the contrary, he takes them to

belong to the very essence of reality, which he conceives of as a process rather than a vast substance. This idea is captured in two of his best known metaphorical sayings. One, highlighting the continuous and irreversible character of temporal change, asserts the impossibility of ever stepping into the same river twice. The other likens reality to fire in the way its continual, incessant alterations in themselves constitute a kind of regularity and stability; continuous change thus provides us with a fundamental constant.

This search for the unity that underlies difference and change has been characteristic of Western philosophy and science right up to the present day: indeed, it is often precisely what novel theories seek to establish. Part of Newton's great achievement in physics was his demonstration that the same basic force – gravity – governed the orbits of the planets, the ocean tides and the falling of an apple. The fundamental idea behind atomic theory is that the different elements are composed of the same stuff, namely, neutrons, protons, electrons and so on; differences between the elements are thus not absolute but can be explained in terms of the number and arrangement of subatomic particles. According to materialism, the fundamental stuff of the universe is matter, so all explanations must ultimately be descriptions of material entities and processes. This was certainly one of the key metaphysical presuppositions that supported the rise of modern science. Nowadays, though, many scientists and philosophers prefer the term **physicalism** to materialism. This is because according to relativity theory matter and energy are interchangeable, which means that energy is just as fundamental as matter. Physicalism, which asserts that ultimate reality is physical – a notion that covers matter and energy – is therefore seen as a more precise label.

It is not too difficult to see how the kind of explanatory reductions illustrated by the theory of gravity or atomic theory could eventually lead to a monistic picture of the universe as a physical system operating according to a small number of basic laws. But there is at least one aspect of our experience that seems to pose a problem for this picture: namely, consciousness. My awareness of the world around me, and my experience of sights, sounds, pains and delights, seem to belong to another dimension. They are subjective or mental. They are *had* by me – suffered or enjoyed as the case may be. They may be correlated with or caused by events in the physical realm; but that does not make them physical. To many philosophers, this difference between the physical and the mental is not one that can be overcome or reduced to some underlying unity. They therefore propose a dualistic account of reality according to which the physical and the mental are both equally fundamental categories, and everything that exists falls into either one or the other. (For further discussion of dualism, see the chapter on Philosophy of mind.)

Materialism versus idealism

Mind and body, the mental and the physical, do seem to be qualitatively different. But isn't the physical more fundamental? It presumably came first and gave rise to the mental.

Here we encounter another of the great debates, one that has been at the centre of modern metaphysics. Which is prior or more basic, the physical or the mental? Physicalism obviously views the physical as primary. The opposite view, which gives priority to mind, traditionally goes by the name of **idealism**. (This use of the term 'idealism' to denote a metaphysical position should not be confused with the other common meaning of the word, according to which 'idealists' are people who hold lofty ideals, resist worldly cynicism and refuse to compromise their principles.) Naturally, much depends here on what we mean by expressions like 'prior' or 'more fundamental'. One kind of priority is *temporal* priority. Here the question is which came first in time. According to many traditional religious views, God, who is conceived to be pure spirit, existed prior to the material world which he created at a certain point in time. Any metaphysics informed by one of these religions will thus grant temporal priority to mind. By contrast, the modern scientific view is that the physical universe existed before there were any beings endowed with sentience or consciousness; on this view, matter existed before minds, the latter only appearing on the scene when certain physical conditions were satisfied.

There is also another, less familiar notion of priority: *ontological* priority. (The term 'ontological' comes from **ontology**, which is the branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of existence and the kinds of thing that exist.) Here, too, modern science tends to grant ontological priority to the physical world, since it views minds as dependent on bodies but not vice versa. Historically, this view was unacceptable to most Western philosophers until modern times for a simple reason: it undermines the idea that the mind or soul – the spiritual part of a person – can exist independently of the body. It is thus incompatible with the traditional Christian doctrine that one's soul survives the death of one's body. It is also at odds with the religious idea that the physical universe is dependent on God for its continued existence from moment to moment. On both counts, anyone who accepts religious teachings in which God or human beings are conceived in essentially spiritual terms is likely to reject physicalism completely.

Now, since a religious outlook predisposes one towards some sort of idealism while the modern scientific viewpoint tends to be physicalistic, we may expect modern philosophy to have drifted away from idealism. Surprisingly, though, even among contemporary professional philosophers there are many who continue to endorse a form of idealism. They do not, in most cases, follow Bishop Berkeley and deny that matter even exists (see the discussion of phenomenalism in the Theory of knowledge chapter). Nor is their position based on any assumptions about how the universe was created. The kind of idealism that continues to appear persuasive to many today rests